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ABSTRACT

As part of the research for a dissertation on composition at Bryn Mawr College during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, hundreds of student essays and daily themes were read. Over and over students affirmed the essential worth and significance of events in their daily lives and of their college education in general. More often than not, students framed significance in terms of some moral lesson that they wanted to teach society. The educator formulated a hypothesis that English teachers of that era believed that moral censure and moral reform of students were both part of their instructional project. A search through the 1910 "English Journal" provided proof that the hypothesis was true. Composition teachers, at both high school and college level, saw signs of depravity and delinquency in their students' writing. In several articles, metaphors of sin and sickness characterize the deficiencies of student writing, while teachers figure themselves as evangelists, Christ figures, and healers. Teachers approached education from the perspective that students were in a state of moral decay. They probably believed that the drudgery of composition instruction was ripe for emphasis on mental discipline. (CR)

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"Figuring the Value of Literacy Education in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries"

Presented by D'Ann George at the CCCC on March 14, 1997

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HANDOUT:

["Bryn Mawr as a Trainer of Good Members of Society"

"Bryn Mawr College fulfills the purpose of training good members of society both in her academic courses and in her social life. In academic work, she teaches her students to "disentangle a skein of thought" and find the important points by her system of lectures and private reading, in which it is always necessary to select the important facts and discard superfluous details. By themes and quizes (sic), she teaches the student force in urging her opinions. In social life, Bryn Mawr gives poise and tact, for in the constant companionship with other girls, the student learns to accommodate herself to others. All these gifts which Bryn Mawr imparts to her daughters tend to make them good and useful members of society."

Margery Scattergood, 1913]

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As part of the research for my dissertation on "Composition and the Composing of Voices at Bryn Mawr College" during the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries, I read hundreds of student essays and daily themes. Over and over I heard students affirming the

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essential worth and significance of events in their daily lives and of their college education in general. More often than not, they framed significance in terms of some moral lesson that they wanted to teach society or some moral improvement program.

The essay I have given you is a typical example of what I saw between about 1890-1916.

I want to point out that David Jolliffee, in an essay called "The Moral Subject in College Composition," has observed similar things in student essays at Harvard from roughly the same period, and then I would like to begin my essay where David ended his, and that is with a question about why, at this point in history, students found it necessary moralize so much in their compositions? Why, in other words, did they feel the need to take on the burden of censuring themselves and society and of proposing moral improvement programs? And why were they so optimistic that their education would be the vehicle through which they could achieve moral reformation?

Stephen Witte has demonstrated that when students decide what to write about in a class, or when they are asked to write about something whether they like it or not, they have to respond to cultural, institutional, and instructional constraints and demands. They have to write something, in other words, that their society, their college and their teachers will deem acceptable. It stands to reason, then, that college students wrote about their own moral insights, and efforts for moral improvement, in response to suggestions from their teacher,

from their institutions, and from the culture at large that they and their generation lacked character or morals and needed to prove their own moral worthiness.

In order to test my hypothesis, I needed proof that English teachers believed that moral censure and moral reform of students were both part of their instructional project. And sure enough, a search through articles printed in the English Journal during the 1910's provided many instances of composition teachers, at both the college and high school level, reading into their students' writing signs of depravity and delinquency. Bad spelling, poor use of punctuation, and slang, they believed, signified laziness, weakness, negligence, lack of discipline, and even perniciousness. As teachers discussed the linguistic aberrations of their students, their tone was one of real loathing and righteous indignation. On a more deeply metaphorical level, these teachers read in their students' papers the signs of souls in need of salvation, of diseased bodies in need of healing.

While I read you some selections from these articles, listen to how often metaphors of sin and sickness characterize the deficiencies of student writing while teachers figure themselves as evangelists, Christ figures, and healers.

In 1911, Beloit College sent out a questionnaire to 25 leading colleges and universities in an effort to "devise some efficient method of meeting the needs of students in Freshman composition who, because of inherited weakness, mental inertia, or poor training, show a lamentable ignorance and slovenliness in matters of good use and

grammatical structure." The authors were skeptical about the typical solutions, such as the attempt to "wash" the students soiled English, because "with each new set of themes it comes back almost as dirty as it was before." In the end, lamented the authors, the student passes courses even with "his multitudinous sins," and is "a constant shame to his rhetoric teachers for ever after.

Teachers at the University of Illinois likewise expressed concern about both their students' lack of good character and their linguistic aberrations. When deciding how best to deliver instruction to students, said the authors, "an element which enters into our calculations is discipline. Lazy and careless students appear everywhere, and the problem is how to make them punctual in the performance of their duties. A far more pernicious habit, however, is that of persistently making the same error." At Illinois, curing students of their pernicious habits meant taking a "firm stand against illiteracy" through a "fixed standard in which, from the very start, the student is graded according as he misses the ideal of correct, well-punctuated, idiomatic and fluent English which the staff feels it may reasonably expect." "Sins" against this fixed standard, explain the authors, "would be charged to the student from the very start."

Percy Long described a similar rationale for Harvard's one-size-fits-all method of instruction and evaluation. Against errors, Long asserted, the teacher must maintain "an attitude of scorn." Holding students accountable for every deviation from standard English would "provide a thorny path for the negligent student" who must be "forced

into a path of diligence." Each class followed a standard, "ready-made routine that Long proudly compared to "putting the victim in a rowing machine and making him go through the motions."

Claiming that "any composition teacher knows that moral qualities count as heavily as the intrinsic excellence of the work itself," James Routh of Tulane University worked his moral expectations for students directly and unabashedly into his grading criteria. The specific moral qualities that he looked for when assigning a grade sound like the definition of a good employee: punctuality, reliability, initiative, and enterprise. To determine whether or not a student had these qualities, Routh would ask himself: "Does he surmount difficulties or lie down before them? Is he addicted to excuses? Or does he have the habit of succeeding?

Lane Cooper of Cornell University connected linguistic irregularity to psychological abnormality. "What does the correction of papers actually mean?" he asked in an article by that title. And then, in answer to his question: "Briefly, it means the correction, or straightening, or normalizing of one personality by another through the instrumentality of truth expressed in language." By correcting the irregularities in students' language, Cooper believed that he converted "unfed, unorganized and insensitive minds into minds that are well-nourished, orderly and sensitive." It was as though language was the mere vehicle through which he delved into students inner being--the very seat of their personality. In fact, Cooper advised teachers to make the correction of papers subordinate to this larger aim of normalizing the personality, lest the teacher "wage an unceasing strife

with the external symptoms of illiteracy, and never touch the inner seat of weakness and disease."

And yet Cooper does not figure the composition instructor as a psychologist or a medical doctor. Instead, the teacher is an evangelist, who models his image after Christ: "He is lifted up, and draws all men to him," says Cooper, quoting scripture and alluding to the power of the crucifixion to compel men to follow God. Cooper means his reference to Christ to show that the composition instructor must lead students to psychological and spiritual reform through the aberration of irregularities in their language.

Interestingly, Cooper does not send the writing teacher out to convert the masses. Instead, the instructor should focus his evangelistic efforts on those students who show promise of maintaining the purity of the English language, and more or less ignore the others. "Whom the Lord loveth, he chastenteth," and "to those who have, shall be given," Cooper says, justifying his exclusionary practices.

While Cooper believes that linguistic aberrations are symptomatic of serious psychological and spiritual defects, he holds that instruction can never completely reverse the defect. For this reason the instructor himself must not only "be a well of English undefiled," but also must exercise pure language unconsciously--must be in possession of a pure English that is a product of his disposition, rather than his learning or effort. Deviant language is not just a superficial sign of class difference for Cooper: it reflects deeper, impenetrable defects in one's character and psyche.

Emma Breck, of Oakland High School, believed that Americans in the early 20th century were experiencing a general spiritual and moral decline, and thought that it was the special duty of English teachers to "check this moral degeneracy."

> We are a country of wonderful material advancement and wealth, but we cannot remain truly great without spiritual development as well. There is a great need of this today, for many of the old forces for good that furnished past generations with a present help in time of trouble have ceased to be operative or are fast losing their efficiency. We are no longer a Bible-reading people; the church and Sunday school are fast losing their hold; family life is less intimate and watchful; respect for law and authority is decreasing, while forces of evil are steadily multiplying in our midst. The moving pictures and the vaudevilles, cheap and commonplace if not immoral, the trashy magazine, the daily newspaper with its scandal and vulgar comic supplement are but a few of the agencies at work which have already helped to bring about a cheapening of ideals, a lowering of standards, and a blunting of fine sensibilities and distinctions, already ominously perceptible in our American people, both man and youth.

Given the belief of these teachers that non-standard language reflects a student's moral and spiritual degeneracy, it is not difficult to understand why so many student essays express such moral

earnestness and sincerity. If they couldn't keep from sinning, they could at least claim to hate sin.

I want to end by asking one more question, or set of questions: why did Composition instructors feel that it was their special duty to censor and to circumscribe the moral behavior of students? Did teachers in other disciplines feel that they had this same duty?

My guess is that the answer lies in a connection between the decline of instruction in classical languages like Latin and Greek and the rise of instruction in English. The rationale for studying Latin had always been that rigorous study of the rules governing language built mental discipline and character. While administrators, parents and business people largely disregarded the importance of studying classical languages by the end of 19th century, I think it quite possible that they expected English instruction--particularly Composition--would carry on the socializing influence of studying Latin and Greek.

Le Baron Briggs, for example, who taught English Composition at Harvard during this period and trained many younger instructors, expressed a lot of nostalgia for the days when students studied Latin. Latin grammar, contended Briggs, was the kind of difficult challenge that strengthened a student's self-discipline and character:

> Take the old system in its most monstrous form,--take learning the Latin grammar by heart before translating any Latin author; nobody now defends a practice so stupid: yet that wonderful feat of memory strengthened many a

> memory for wonderful feats. The boy who had mastered Andrews and Stoddard knew the power of patient effort, the strength of drudgery well done.

For Briggs the word "drudgery" had special connotations. It did not mean work that one should avoid at all costs. Instead, it meant work that one probably wishes to avoid but engages in anyway for the sake of moral improvement. Students needed "to understand that nothing can be mastered without drudgery, and that drudgery in preparation for service is not only respectable but beautiful." "Stumbling blocks," he asserts, "become stepping stones." According to Briggs, the problem with the modern student and modern notions about education was a lack of rigorous engagement in and appreciation for drudge work.

Briggs also associated the moral degeneration of students with the imprecise way that academies were teaching language. "We have boys who cannot spell, men who cannot spell, teachers who cannot spell, teachers of English who cannot spell, college professors who cannot spell and who have a mean opinion of spelling." This refusal to commit to accuracy will result in a general inability to exert oneself intellectually in other areas of academic work, Briggs feared. One college student at Harvard, for example, "refused to take pains with his English because, he said, he had been brought up among people who spoke English well 'by intuition.'" This "picturesque" English, warned Briggs, "is seldom capable of difficult work." The purpose of the grammar, therefore, is "to drill and drill and drill; to teach accuracy, concentration, self-command," and the center of such an education is

the English language--"a great deal of reading, writing, and speaking in the English tongue."

Briggs and others, I think, approached education from the perspective that students were in a state of moral decay. What students needed was not practical skills but mental and moral discipline. Perhaps Composition instruction was ripe for an emphasis on mental discipline because it had become increasingly associated with drudgery: at a time students were increasingly able to choose their own course work in an elective system, composition was something both teachers and students associated with compulsion.